

Re-theorising the Social and its Models after Lévi-Strauss's and Pierre Clastres's Study of Stateless Social Assemblages

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ABSTRACT

The study of stateless social groups defies our conceptual imagination in several correlative ways: denominational (we tend to represent them thus, but are stateless formations what we call groups at all?), historical (we tend to assign a lower degree of social development in comparison to state societies, but should we?), and structural (apart from the negative definition as 'groups without state' we lack a social-theory model). Being unable to represent stateless social 'groups' as little more than a residue of the past we are therefore unable to (re)think them. This paper outlines some recent developments in post-structuralist Brazilian anthropology on sociality and gender and suggests that the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009) and Pierre Clastres (1934-1977) offer a counterpoint to this discouraging picture and provide us with important conceptual tools that help us move beyond the mere description of 'immediate-return societies' and/or groups displaying a 'reverse dominance hierarchy'. Furthermore, I suggest that Lévi-Strauss and Clastres invite us to re-conceptualise important aspects of social theory. Accordingly, I propose to distinguish between four social models (or models of sociality) in virtue of their contrasting arithmetic's and constitutive principles, as well as to determine their reciprocal relations in terms of historical transition, meta-logical disclosure, logical inference, and/or radical exteriority.

Key words: *Stateless societies, Social Theory, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Pierre Clastres*

INTRODUCTION: SOCIETY AND THE SOCIAL

Allow me to begin by saying that, from the three conceptual problems involved in the study of stateless societies which I have called denominational, historical, and structural in the abstract above, I will focus here on the second and the third. Yet I would also like to problematise at the outset, if briefly, our notions of ‘society’ and the ‘social’ as givens that can be dispensed with without any further qualification. As a first observation, then: the emergence of ‘social theory’ coincides with that of ‘modernity’ (Turner 2009: 1). This may seem to be a simple truism, yet there is more to it than meets the eye. For it not only points to the fact that there was no social *theory* as we now know it before modernity, it means, more importantly, that the very *concept* of the social is likewise a modern invention. Rapport & Overing (2000: 333) make a similar point:

Throughout the modernist period, a concept of society has underpinned the construction of all social theory, whatever its hue or denomination. If the concept of culture has played the role of queen to all analytic categories of the human sciences, the notion of society has been king. It is the master trope of high modern social thought. As such, it is nowadays considered to be a treacherous friend, a term to be used at one’s risk.

The concept of society is in crisis for several reasons: (1) it reflects a too-narrow understanding of what the ‘social’ is; (2) far from being universal, ‘the social’ has a specific meaning derived from the making of the modern ‘nation-state[s], capitalism, imperialism and the colonialist endeavour; and (3) the modern representation of the ‘social’ with its transcendent, univocal, and normative premises thus proves useless to access other less abstract ways of being social. Relatedly, as Wagner (1974) has underlined, there is an additional and no-less-crucial problem of defining stateless social assemblages as ‘groups’ (whether residential, genealogical, political, economical, etc.) – as though our own understanding of what people do and why and how they come together could unproblematically match what they themselves do and make of it.

Stateless social ‘assemblages’ (which may be a better term than ‘groups’; see DeLanda 2006) have largely suffered from this conceptual bias in two other ways, historical and structural. Historically, they have too-often been assigned a lower degree of social development in comparison to state societies in accordance to the ethnocentric premises of social-Darwinism (Clastres 1989 [1974], 1994 [1980]); Segovia 2018a, 2018b). Structurally, stateless assemblages are defined negatively

as ‘human groups without state’ and/or by vague and unsatisfactory descriptions of ‘cooperative’ or ‘harmonious’ behaviours. Postmodern ideas about the ‘micro-foundations’ of the ‘social’ (Holmwood 2009) are as little help here as the ‘macro-foundations’ taken for granted in North-American Parsonian sociology and elsewhere (and I will return to this issue *in fine*, when discussing Lyotard’s (1984 [1979]) well-known contribution to the reformulation of social theory and knowledge). In short, being unable to represent stateless social assemblages as more than a residue of the pre-modern past, we are unable to think them – or, better, to rethink them, as they are themselves as much the product of human interaction as they are the product of thought (Lévi-Strauss 1966 [1962]). And yet we should for that very reason accept the challenge they present and push our conceptual imagination further in that direction; after all, thought consists in pushing our imagination beyond the narrow limits of the familiar? This was Clastres’ view (1989 [1974]: 26): ‘is it not true ... that thought is loyal to itself only when it moves against the incline?’

LÉVI-STRAUSS AND CLASTRES

Lévi-Strauss supplied the first beautifully fascinating and extraordinarily extensive clues about the conceptual complexity of stateless social assemblages in *Mythologiques* (1969–81).¹ As will become clear, his work continues to inspire anthropologists working in Brazil. Yet it is Clastres who offers, in my view, the sharpest of all conceptual tools to help us finally to comprehend what these assemblages were (and are) ultimately about: not just ‘societies without the state’, but ‘societies against the state’, i.e. social assemblages that equipped themselves with the means to prevent state formation and its possible prequels (cf. Scott 2009, Benjamin 2011).

Naturally, Clastres is not beyond critique: Barbosa (2004) is surely right to question Clastres’ use of ‘society’ as a too-abstract a term and to recommend ‘sociality’ instead (thereby in speaking of ‘sociality against the state’). However, the oft-voiced criticism that Clastres incoherently conferred inexistence and pre-existence to the state at the same time (Graeber 2004: 23) is as unfair as it is epistemologically misguided: Clastres repeatedly uses the term ‘state’ as a synonym for ‘coercive power’ (cf. 1989 [1974]: 24, 218) and therefore expressly acknowledges the existence of more and less evolved types of state (1994 [1980]: 24) – ‘evolved’ simply meaning here ‘intricate’. The suggestion that Clastres was a *sui generis* ‘evolutionist’ (Deleuze & Guattari 1987 [1980]: 358–60) unable to realise that the ‘state’ was always there, that there was never a transition to the state-form from a previous and paradoxically-fully-social ‘state of nature’ is also wide of the mark:

suffice to say that this criticism unwarrantedly turns conjecture into historical pseudo-evidence (cf. Tampio 2015: 80). More fruitful is Barclay's (1990: 135-42) nuancing of Clastres's views through a brief comparative analysis of African, Amerindian, and Melanesian stateless forms of sociality; his distinction between different kinds of chieftainship related to three forms of reciprocity (symmetrical, as it is often the case with many hunter-gatherers, centrifugal as in Melanesia, and centripetal, corresponding to types studied by Clastres in South America) informed his subsequent discussion of the origins of the state in conversation with both Clastres (1989 [1974]) and Hocart (1970). Why Barclay's work passes unmentioned in Graeber & Sahlins's (2017) recent Hocartian-inspired book on the genealogy of the state, completely escapes me.

Back to our issue: Clastres provides us with the conceptual tools essential to decipher and thus do theoretical justice to the immensely complex, while simultaneously simple, social structure of these assemblages – which are anything but 'primitive'. One of the conceptual tools that Clastres provides for the study of stateless sociality is the general role of myth (1994 [1980]: 122-3) for the maintenance of 'society' (to retain Clastres' word choice) as an undivided body against the potential of division, i.e. of any emergence of autonomous organs of power or forms of coercive authority. A second tool, on which I will focus here, is his inscription of the reciprocal subordination of gender in his analysis of 'warrior groups' (1994 [1980]: 169-200), in which myth plays a part, too. In brief: the reciprocal subordination of gender roles serves as a means extensive to other social parameters, which some stateless social assemblages use to prevent social division (and thereby maintain the principle of reciprocity which in turn maintains cohesion). In addition, this hints (and this seems to me to be the truly crucial point) at the structure of such assemblages being both serial (with various types of social segments per group) and binary (each segment dividing into two opposite while complementary terms). This means that their geometry is prismatic, their arithmetic form is that of an articulated multiplicity or plurality and that they are determined by the rule of alliance. From this, one can infer a number of significant contrasts with respect to other social models, including the despotic, the republican, the neoliberal and the Marxist. However, I will postpone this discussion and the no-less decisive debate over the social model(s) that we need to imagine today, to the final sections of the essay. To highlight the importance of Clastres' work, I want first to return to Lévi-Strauss's enduring influence, and acknowledge that he was ruminating on the notion of 'binary serialism' as the core idea on which the political structure of many stateless social assemblages had been effectively built, as early as 1944, when he undertook his study of 'reciprocal subordination' among the Bororo – that is, five

years before the completion of his landmark PhD dissertation on the elementary structures of kinship.

In the early 1990s and, more explicitly and systematically in the late 2000s Lévi-Strauss's pioneering notion of 'reciprocal subordination' was recovered by Viveiros de Castro (1992 [1986]: 283, 2014 [2009]: 154, 210-11, 213) and subsequently Perrone-Moisés & Sztutman (in 2009), Sztutman (in 2013) and, more recently, Falleiros (in 2015 and 2016). Viveiros de Castro re-coined it as 'dualism in perpetual disequilibrium' and traced the expression 'perpetual disequilibrium' back to Lévi-Strauss himself – specifically to his study of the avuncular marriage of the Tupi in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1969 [1949]). Lévi-Strauss's use of that and several other related expressions is much more complex and carries other implications (as Viveiros de Castro [2012] has also observed). First, he uses the expression 'perpetual disequilibrium' only once (1969[1949]: 447) elsewhere speaking instead of 'double disequilibrium' (1969[1949]: 30), 'a state of disequilibrium and tension' (1969[1949]: 38), 'lasting disequilibrium' (1969[1949]: 57), 'dynamic disequilibrium' (1969[1949]: 139), 'disequilibrium' alone (1969[1949]: 183, 241), and 'disequilibrium and paradox' (1969 [1949]: 237). Secondly, he employs most of these expressions to describe the system of marriage and kinship among various social 'groups' of South America, Northern Burma, and South India alike (1969 [1949]: 237, 447), yet he employs one of them ('lasting disequilibrium') additionally to describe the dynamics of the exchange of gifts (1969[1949]: 57). Thirdly and more importantly, he uses the expression 'double disequilibrium' to define the 'social' in terms of 'alliance':

The incest prohibition expresses the transition from the natural fact of consanguinity to the cultural fact of alliance. Nature by itself already moves to the double rhythm of receiving and giving, which finds expression in the opposition of marriage and descent. But, although present in both and in some way bestowing a common form upon them, this rhythm does not display the same aspect in both nature and culture. The characteristic of nature is that it can give only what has been received. Heredity expresses this permanence and continuity. However, in the sphere of culture, the individual always receives more than he gives, and gives more than he receives. This double disequilibrium is expressed by the processes of education and invention, one being the inverse of the other, and both contrasting with the process of heredity. It is certainly not our intention here to suggest that the vital phenomena should be considered as phenomena in equilibrium; the contrary is obviously true. But biological disequilibria only appear as such in their relationship with the

physical world. In comparison with cultural phenomena, they show, on the contrary, stability, whereas dynamic synthesis is now applicable to the new phenomena. Seen thus, the problem of the transition from nature to culture is reduced to the problem of introducing the accumulatory processes within the repetitive process.

Based on natural facts, which hypothetically are all that are present, how is this introduction possible? As we have just emphasized, nature, like culture, moves to the double rhythm of receiving and giving. But the two moments of this rhythm, as produced by nature, are not viewed indifferently by culture. The first stage, that of receiving, as expressed through biological kinship, finds culture powerless, for a child's heredity is integrally inscribed in the genes transmitted by the parents; whatever they are, such will be the child. The transitory effect of the environment can leave its mark, but cannot make this permanent independently of changes in this environment. But for the moment let us consider marriage, which nature requires just as urgently as descent, if not in the same way or to the same extent. In the first instance, only the fact of marriage is required, but not, within specific limits, its determination. Nature assigns to each individual determinants transmitted by those who are in fact his parents, but it has nothing to do with deciding who these parents will be. Consequently, from the point of view of nature heredity is doubly necessary, firstly as a law—there is no spontaneous generation—and secondly as a specification of the law, for nature not only says that one must have parents, but that one will be like them. As regards marriage, however, nature is satisfied with affirming the law, but is indifferent to its contents. If the relationship between parents and children is strictly determined by the nature of the parents, the relationship between male and female is left entirely to chance and probability. Thus, mutations aside, nature contains one solitary principle of indetermination, revealed in the arbitrariness of marriage. If, in keeping with the evidence, nature is acknowledged as being historically anterior to culture, it can be only through the possibilities left open by nature that culture has been able to place its stamp upon nature and introduce its own requirements without any discontinuity. Culture yields to the inevitability of biological heredity. Eugenics itself can barely claim to manipulate this irreducible fact while respecting its preconditions. But culture, although it is powerless before descent, becomes aware of its rights, and of itself, with the completely different phenomenon of marriage, in which nature for once has not already had the last word. There only, but there finally culture can and must, under pain of not existing, firmly declare 'Me first', and tell nature, 'You go no further' (Lévi-Strauss 1969[1949]: 30-1).

It matters little that the nature/culture divide has now become infinitely more problematic (Descola 2013 [2005]) than it proved to be for Lévi-Strauss; I certainly do not intend to re-establish this division now that we have learned to deconstruct it and turn it fully ‘iridescent’ – as Viveiros de Castro puts it (2014 [2009]: 45) drawing on Deleuze & Guattari’s (1987 [1980]: 95-8, 297, 342, 349-50, 411, 491) notion of widened ‘chromaticism’. I simply want to highlight as plainly and clearly as possible that, in contrast to Radcliffe-Brown [1952], Lévi-Strauss defines the social (‘culture’) as a reciprocal commitment or alliance beyond any equally required (‘natural’) measure – and hence understands ‘society’ (to use this dubious term) as bidirectional solidary excess: for one ‘always receives more than he gives and gives more than he receives’ (= ‘double disequilibrium’). One might be tempted to connect this intuition with Proudhon’s ‘mutualism’, Kropotkin’s ‘mutual aid’, or even Hardt and Negri’s thesis on the inherently revolutionary (insurgent) quality of ‘love’ in today’s world:

Love is a means to escape the solitude of individualism but not, as contemporary ideology tells us, only to be isolated again in the private life of the couple or the family. To arrive at a political concept of love that recognizes it as centered on the production of the common and the production of social life, we have to break away from most of the contemporary meanings of the term by bringing back and working with some older notions (Hardt & Negri 2009: xii. Cf. Hardt & Negri 2004: 352-2, 356).

Ethnography provides us with a many good examples of this. In short, ‘the more you give, the more you have’: love, or – to paraphrase Mauss (1990 [1954]) – the economy of the ‘gift’. (For another take on pre/extra-historical ‘affective alliances’, see Hayden 2003; for a tacit criticism of any unitary understanding of the ‘commons’, Blaser 2016; cf. too Day 2005: 5).

Viveiros de Castro draws on Lévi-Strauss’s *Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949) and, more extensively, on *Mythologiques* (1969–81), where the idea of ‘disequilibrium’ visibly inspires the analysis of a number of Amazonian myths. Sztutman and Perrone-Moisés appear to draw exclusively on the latter work. Taking a step forward (or more precisely, backwards) Falleiros has aptly observed that Lévi-Strauss’s early note on ‘Reciprocity and Hierarchy’ (1944) already contains the seed from which the idea itself might have grown in the *Elementary Structures of Kinship*. This work sets out the notion of ‘reciprocal subordination’ to account for the perplexing asymmetry of human-divine relations and social-status qualifiers among the Bororo:

A perhaps one-sided analysis of the dual organization has too often put the emphasis on the principle of reciprocity as its main cause and result. It is well to remember that the moiety system can express, not only mechanisms of reciprocity but also relations of subordination. But, even in these relations of subordination, the principle of reciprocity is at work; for the subordination itself is reciprocal: the priority which is gained by one moiety on one level is lost to the opposite moiety on the other (Lévi-Strauss 1944: 267-8).

Falleiros also thoughtfully connects the notion of ‘dualism in perpetual disequilibrium’ with that of ‘series’ of ‘binary oppositions’ in Proudhon, thus building an interesting bridge between structural anthropology and anarchist thought (on Lévi-Strauss’s self-acknowledged intellectual debt to Proudhon, see further Segovia 2018c). I would suggest nuancing his formulation of ‘a dialectics without synthesis’ (2016: 108) by looking at Deleuze’s notion of ‘disjunctive synthesis’. At the same time, I would also recommend a return to Clastres, specifically, to his explanation of the symbolic division of gender roles among the ‘warrior tribes’ of the Grand Chaco which Viveiros de Castro, Perrone-Moisés and Sztutman have neglected.

Clastres’ analysis is found in the last chapter of *Archaeology of Violence* 1994 [1980]: 169-200) under the title ‘Sorrows of the Savage Warrior’. Together with the preceding chapter ‘Archaeology of Violence: War in Primitive Societies’, (published in 1977 and included on pp139-167 of the same work) ‘Sorrows of the Savage Warrior’ would inaugurate a larger work which remained incomplete at the time of his premature death in 1977 (p200, note). This is truly a pity, as in ‘Sorrows of the Savage Warrior’ Clastres moves his figures on the tangled chessboard of modern anthropology boldly in a bold and unexpected manner.

To explain, it may be helpful to recall Sherry Ortner’s 1972 much acclaimed and discussed paper ‘Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?’ (Ortner 1996: 21-42; cf. the supplementary essay on pp173-80 of the same volume, ‘So, Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?’). Ortner attributes patriarchy, i.e. male’s domination, to men’s self-delusory and socially-constructed perception of women’s greater proximity to ‘nature’. They tend to deduce this from women’s distinctive biological fertility – and then declare patriarchy ‘universal’. Ortner asks why it is that even in apparently gender-egalitarian societies where there is an apparent lack of gender subordination in everyday life, there is always an issue (symbolic, ritual, etc.) in respect of which women are presented as being inferior to men (cf. however Endicott 1982, Lepowsky 1993).

Clastres’s patient parallel analysis of the sociality and mythology of the ‘warrior tribes’ of the Grand Chaco subverts the premises of Ortner’s question, which is too

dependent on 'feminist' theory to be anthropologically sound (despite the undeniable and undoubtedly rightful need that many women have all over the world, usually in less 'primitive' social formations, to oppose, and free themselves from, male violence, domination, and cruelty). In brief, the argument in 'Sorrows of the Savage Warrior' (1994 [1980]: 193-5) proceeds as follows: war is one of the means, that most stateless social assemblages have to prevent the formation of the state; in 'warrior societies' (i.e. those stateless social assemblages in which war is permanent but involves the 'warrior class' or sub-set of the total male population), men are 'slaves of death' and women are 'mistresses of life'. This relationship determines women's social superiority over men. For that very reason, women are feared and envied by men. Consequently, in the myth their superior position is reversed. 'Paradoxically' women are presented as inferior to men. The principle of dual or 'reciprocal subordination' is at work here – and the 'principle of reciprocity' maintained by this means.

In parenthesis, it is worth noting that Graeber's (2004: 23) acid reproach that Clastres was 'naïve' in his neglect of Yanomami gender violence in his discussion of Amazonian egalitarianism ('one has to wonder how he could possibly miss out on it', writes Graeber) is altogether groundless: Clastres mentioned this in his last published work (Clastres 1994 [1980]: 173), accusing Chagnon (1968) in turn of 'sensationalism'. It is indeed interesting to note the frequent dismissal of Clastres's thought as 'naïve' and/or 'romantic' in Anglo-Saxon writing (Dean 1999; Geertz 2000:109). But the point, here, is that Clastres' observations reframe Ortner's question: it is not there is always an issue in respect to which women are depicted as being inferior to men, even in societies that look egalitarian. Rather, it is that they are depicted in this way because they are *de facto* superior to men. The opposite also holds true: men are portrayed as being superior to women because they are *de facto* inferior to them. Falleiros (2016: 118-20) applies a similar principle to the distribution of gender roles among the A'uwe-Xavante, not only within the larger group but also within the family, thus coming very very close to Clastres hypothesis.

SOCIETY REFORMULATED

The dual organisation of stateless social assemblages is X-shaped or chiasmatic – and serial too, one may add, inasmuch as it encompasses, and superimposes, a number of different terms and relations. Obviously, defining their basal or constituent 'arithmetics' in this way – which both Lévi-Strauss and Clastres thus authorise – implies taking a firm theoretical step beyond their (non-theoretical) 'description' as provided, for example, by Woodburn (1982) and Boehm (1993). In their work, these societies are depicted as 'immediate-return societies', in other words, as socie-

ties in which everyone obtains a direct and immediate return from their labour (as though the modern notion of individual production could represent the key to unravel their structure) and as societies displaying a 'reverse dominance hierarchy' (thereby keeping the very notion of hierarchy that they undermine), respectively.

How does all this affect our notion, and ultimately our theory, of the 'social'? What kind of 'social model' is implied here and which are simultaneously ruled out? I shall now turn to these considerations, outlining four antagonistic social models and concluding with a general reflection on Lyotard's earlier, analogous attempt to contribute to this crucial discussion in *The Postmodern Condition* (1984 [1979]).

Overall, modern social theory (if you excuse the pleonasm) is inclined to acknowledge three, and only three, types of social formations. For the sake of clarity, I label these as α , β , and γ :

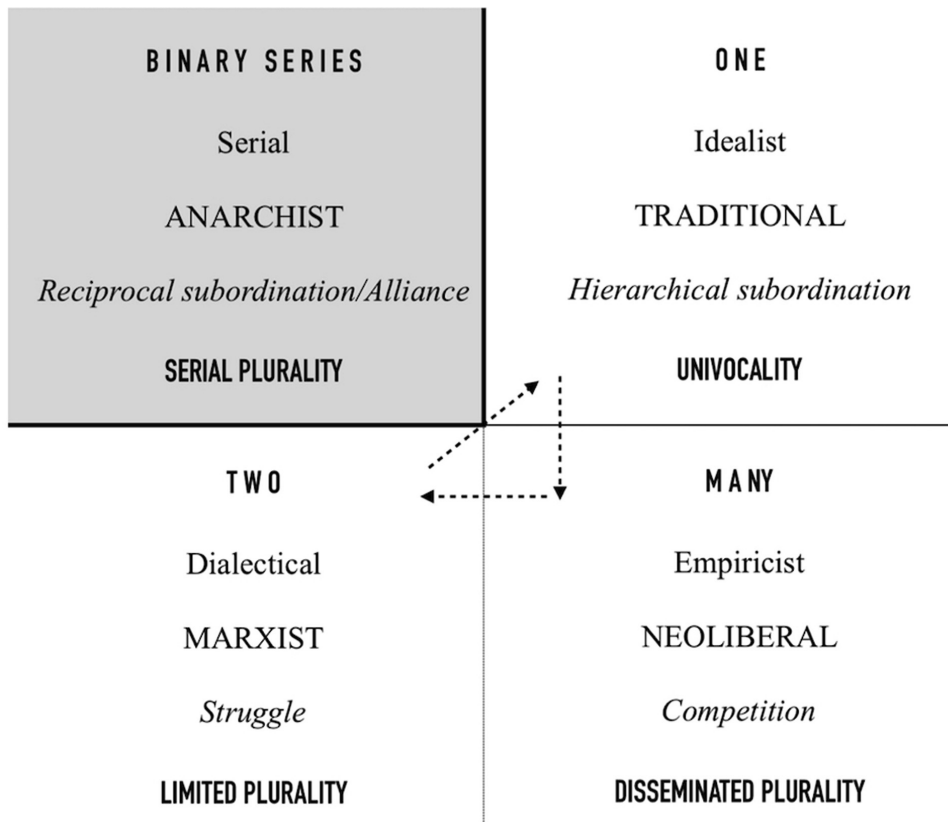
(α) First are what I propose to call the 'societies' of the One. These can actually take many forms: an absolutist or democratic monarchy, the parliament, the national *Geist* and its secularisation: national sovereignty, etc. In a word, the traditional social model: nation-states whose articulation is more or less vertical and their coherence dependent upon segmentary subordination – an idealistic and authoritarian model based on the idea of univocality.

(β) Second are 'societies' of the Many. These are based on a plurality of individuals who compete against each other. In short, the empiricist, liberal and neoliberal, model, which tends to replace the state with the market or minimise the role of the former vis-à-vis the prerogatives of the latter – and which is based on the idea of a disseminated plurality. (This is a particularly eulogical model and misleading in its pretension to universality, for while it trains an apparently inoffensive lens to the description of sociality, it actually projects onto the latter the assumption that we are first and foremost 'individuals'. For an ethnographically-informed criticism of this modern representation, see Strathern 1988, Smith 2012 and, from an anarchist standpoint, Falleiros 2017).²

(γ) Finally, we have the dialectic model with its inherently divided 'societies': social formations spinning around the notion of the Two, where one social assemblage opposes another (in the form of class struggle, for example) and old and new dualisms inform the social dynamics. It is rather difficult to foresee how anything new might eventually emerge out of such twofold grammar, without recourse to the Hegelian trickery or the introduction of new, surveillance, e.g. a communist Party on top of a socialist state – such is the Marxist model of a limited (twofold) plurality.*

The question is, why on earth should one stop here? What about (δ) those transversal social assemblages in which horizontal alliances and reciprocal subordinations abound, i.e. where binary serial relations of all sorts operate to prevent domination, competition, and conflict? These are equally incompatible with univocality, disseminated conflicting plurality and the limited divided plurality of the established models; these anarchist formations specialise in the art of turning asymmetry into symmetry and they defy our political imagination – and our conceptual grasp.

Distinguishing between four, rather than three types of social formations, while exercising our disempowered modern theoretical skills, generates the following graphic. This should be read clockwise by moving from the upper-right to the lower-right quadrant, then from the lower-right quadrant to the lower-left one, and then up from the lower-left quadrant to the upper-left. The arrows represent historical transition, meta-logical disclosure, and logical inference, respectively, in opposition to the radical exteriority of the upper-left quadrant vis-à-vis the others).



WHICH THEORETICAL MODEL THEN?

To conclude and consider the implications of this anthropological modelling for political theory, I turn now as promised to Lyotard. In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard writes:

[I]n principle there have been ... two basic representational models for society: either society forms a functional whole, or it is divided in two. An illustration of the first model is suggested by Talcott Parsons [1951/9, 1967] ... and his school, and of the second, by the Marxist current (all of its component schools, whatever differences they may have, accept both the principle of class struggle and dialectics as a duality operating within society).

This methodological split, which defines two major kinds of discourse on society, has been handed down from the nineteenth century. The idea that society forms an organic whole, in the absence of which it ceases to be a society (and sociology ceases to have an object of study), dominated the minds of the founders of the French school. Added detail was supplied by functionalism; it took yet another turn in the 1950s with Parsons's conception of society as a self-regulating system. [Yet t]he theoretical and even material model is no longer the living organism; it is provided by cybernetics, which, during and after the Second World War, expanded the model's applications.

... [In turn w]hat guides Marxism ... is a different model of society ... This model was born of the struggles accompanying the process of capitalism's encroachment upon traditional civil societies...

... [T]oday more than ever, knowing about ... society involves first of all choosing what approach the inquiry will take ... One can decide that the principal role of knowledge is as an indispensable element in the functioning of society, and act in accordance with that decision, only if one has already decided that society is a giant machine.

Conversely, one can count on its critical function, and orient its development and distribution in that direction, only after it has been decided that society does not form an integrated whole, but remains haunted by a principle of opposition. The alternative seems clear: it is a choice between the homogeneity and the intrinsic duality of the social, between functional and critical knowledge (Lyotard 1984 [1979]: 11-13).

Lyotard takes us back to models α and γ – and their corresponding forms of knowledge. By the late 1970s he was as dissatisfied with the α -model (which he

had always disliked) as he was with γ -model: he was neither a Parsonian nor (any more) a Marxist. He imagined an altogether different social and epistemological model:

I chose language games as my general methodological approach. I am not claiming that the *entirety* of social relations is of this nature – that will remain an open question. But there is no need to resort to some fiction of social origins to establish that language games are the minimum relation required for society to exist: event before he is born, the human child is already positioned as the referent in the story recounted by those around him, in relation to which he will inevitably chart his course... .

On the other hand, in a society whose communication component is becoming more prominent day by day, both as a reality and as an issue, it is clear that language assumes a new importance. It would be superficial to reduce its significance to the traditional alternative between manipulatory speech and the unilateral transmission of messages on the one hand, and free expression and dialogue on the other (Lyotard 1984 [1979]: 15-16).

A little bit later Lyotard (1984 [1979]: 17) proposed the ‘atomization of the social into flexible networks of language games’, or what amounts to the same: the liberation of as many ontologies of the ‘social’ as language options – and the parallel transference of knowledge from the functional and critical into a more creative regime, it would seem. Does this differ in any respect from our second model (β): Yes and no. To explain:

Lyotard wrote *The Postmodern Condition* when the α -model was becoming a β -model or, better, when the β -model was literally making the α -model implode from within. Like most postmodernists, Lyotard has been accused of neoliberalism due to the alleged affinities of his philosophy with neoliberal discourse. Yet his philosophy was all for the liberation of as many possible singular views as one would be willing to imagine against any ‘grand narratives’ (e.g. the Parsonian and the Marxist theories of the social). The problem, of course, is that capitalism (which is also a flux) can easily adapt to this and make of it, so to speak, its own new ever-expanding territory. Indeed, something like this has happened, and not only in terms of theory. It may just be that Lyotard’s postmodern philosophy and the neoliberal ideology dovetailed in time, if not for the same reasons. Be that as it may, the issue of the reconfiguration of our knowledge of the social remains problematic, and it seems we have advanced only a short step from where Lyotard stood in 1979. One thing appears to be clear, however: that in the precise

domain of theory, we need a sophisticatedly multifocal but congruent – which does not mean totalising – social model. For even if we need to free ourselves from the too-rigid concept of ‘society’, we must also avoid replacing description for theory and/or the dissolution of the latter into an inventory of ‘situational’ social events (*pace* Stewart & Strathern 2017: 55-9) or fragmentary ‘micro’-realities. For ‘the social is only real when integrated in a system’ (Lévi-Strauss 1987 [1950]: 25) – even if plural and acentred. This, I would suggest, is Clastres’ view, too. It represents as urgent a task for today’s political anthropology as the task of creating new ‘warlike groupings’ (or assemblages) that allow to us fight the ‘unifying world’ of capital (Mong-Hy 2017) and escape its many splinters for political practice. For ultimately theory is also a form of revolutionary (or again, insurgent) practice.³

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NOTES

1. One should also mention: Descola’s (1994 [1986]) elegant essay on Amazonian ecology, Viveiros de Castro’s (1992 [1986]) brilliantly provocative study on Amazonian cannibalism, Schrempf’s (1992) intrepid comparison of Zeno’s paradoxes and Kant’s antinomies with Polynesian mythology, and Kohn’s recent monograph *How Forests Think* (2013) (the title is eloquent enough to dispense with any supplementary gloss, but it should be emphasised that it stands at the crossroads of anthropology and ‘theoretical biology’ (as initially fancied by von Uexküll 1926 [1920], 1975 [1934])). There are many excellent works by Sahlins (e.g. 1968, 2017 [1972]) on economy and social layout; Scott’s (2009) remarkable incursion into the ‘art of not being governed’ and the two latest contributions to this thought-provoking line scholarship, Graber & Sahlins’s *On Kings* (2017) and Scott’s *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States* (2017), which

diversely inquire into the intriguing becoming-state, to put it succinctly, of a number of such once stateless social formations.

2. Let me quickly add here that labelling as 'postmodernist' the questioning of reality and representation [Mascia-Lees, Sharpe & Ballerino Cohen 1989], or the skepticism over the anthropologist's ability to integrate the context of investigation and the context of explanation, as Reed [2010] puts it, overlooks the fact that such developments amount to intensifying what Holbraad & Pedersen [2017: 9] call the 'three abiding modes of anthropological thought: reflexivity, conceptualization, and experimentation', without which anthropology would be impossible, as it would be unable to keep open the question of what the observed phenomena are and to ponder how our concepts must be reworked in order to express them – and therefore that they amount to continuing and enriching a conversation they do not attempt at substituting. See also Oldani 1998.
3. As well as essential to anthropological and sociological thought, I should like to add here by way of conclusion. Otherwise we would be in position to see that society is a Western concept, but not how it actually blinds us to see other social worlds, what are these, and how to render their reality expressible; or to understand that the social life is always complex, but not what such complexity may alternatively consists of; or to infer from observation that there are different kinds of social assemblages in the world, but not their constituting principles; or that humans are social beings and their cultures somehow part of nature, but not the specific ways in which they can be so. These realities, complexities, principles, and ways of being cannot just be observed and described, they must also be thought and thereby theorised.

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